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Crossing Boundaries and Transforming Experiences in *Kāvya* Literature

SUMMARY: Some boundaries can never be crossed but boundaries in literature seem to be like no boundaries at all, whether in the geographical, mythological, literary or literal sense. A few of the examples from *kāvya* literature can be seen in Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntala* vs. the story of Śakuntalā in the *Mahābhārata* and in his *Vikramorvaśīya* vs. the story of Purūravas and Urvaśī in RV 10, 95. In *kathā* literature geographical hindrances are easily crossed as in Daṇḍin's *Daśakumāracarita* and also in Subandhu's *Vāsavadattā*. In Bāṇa's *Kādambarī* crossing the boundaries happens in space and time through different reincarnations of his characters. *Kāvya* authors often crossed boundaries by evoking mythological and epic figures, alluding to earlier works, using known motifs, themes and citations, and created new experiences by transforming them.

KEYWORDS: RV 10,95, *kāvya*, *nāṭya*, Kālidāsa, *Vikramorvaśīya*, *Śakuntalā*, *kathā*, Daṇḍin, geography, history, Subandhu, cultural tradition, Bāṇa, reincarnation

My paper intends to re-open some already known questions and put them again on the indological stage. Although some literary characters seem to be well-known, they are sometimes hardly recognizable in their changed forms. What follows is just a draft with cursory retelling of plots.

The famous *saṃvāda* RV 10,95, a dialogue hymn of 18 verses about the love of king Purūravas and *apsaras* Urvaśī, was the only one among

the *saṃvāda*s to become the subject of a *nāṭya* in *Vikramorvaśīya* by the renowned Kālidāsa. The popularity of the story can be confirmed by the fact that it is found in later literature, in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*, *Harivaṃśa*, *Rāmāyaṇa* and several *purāṇa*s, as well as in the *Kathāsaritsāgara*. There is no decisive answer to the question why Kālidāsa chose the plot known from the Ṛgvedic hymn which had an atmosphere so different from the one observed in his *nāṭaka.* In the hymn there is no trace of human love which is present in Kālidāsa's version of the ancient story. Kālidāsa, on the other hand, does not mention some important features found in the hymn, such as *ghṛta* or ghee, Urvaśī's main food, nudity, lambs, etc. In *saṃvāda* there is no mention of Citralekhā, of the abduction of Urvaśī by the demon Keśin and her deliverance by Purūravas; of Urvaśī as an actress, of Indra, of Bharata, of *vidūṣaka*, etc. In the hymn Purūravas is forbidden to enter the sacred grove, in Kālidāsa's drama Urvaśī trespasses into Kumāra's grove and is transformed into a creeper, becoming lost to Purūravas; we then follow her subsequent recovery through the power of the gem of reunion, the incident of the loss of the gem and the restoration to Purūravas of his son Āyus. A happy ending comes when Indra allows Urvaśī to stay with Purūravas as long as he lives, quite contrary to the happenings in the hymn.

This is an obvious transformation from the Vedic ritual story into a *kāvya* love story. Kālidāsa writes in the *kāvya* style about love in the *sambhoga-vipralambha-sambhoga* way. The Ṛgvedic hymn still defies all explanations as to its meaning, which stays hidden despite many theories trying to explain it. Gitomer observes well that

> the Vedic hymn presupposes a floating body of stories…suggested by scattered references elsewhere in the Veda, and by the hymn's own vagueness; the author appears to have written a dialogue epitomizing events with which he assumes his audience to be familiar. (Gitomer 1984: 348)

Kālidāsa introduced new devices into the "original" story, but we do not know which one, whether he used the *saṃvāda* version at all

or if his source could have been some other one. Gitomer states that Kālidāsa's "… intense evocation of the madness of love-in-separation reveals the nature of classicizing processes in the Gupta age, as well as the poet's skill, sensitivity, and innovation" (Gitomer 1984: 348).

While Keith (Keith 1966: 157) criticizes Kālidāsa's Urvaśī for her passionate and undisciplined love and Purūravas for his lack of self-restraint and manliness, Warder does the same with Kālidāsa's *nāyaka* and *nāyikā* in his *Abhijñānaśākuntala*. In his opinion:

> Here lyricism is carried to an extreme which disregards story and plot… The hero, Duṣyanta, is shown as doing nothing… Things happen to him through fate, a curse, or divine intervention. His character remains blank and we cannot believe in the depth of his feelings. (Warder 1977: 148)

> What is his emotion when, due to the curse, he has completely forgotten his love? How can we imagine such a thing, which is completely outside our experience? What *rasa* can we have from it? In short the play does not deal with human experience. It is fairy story, which perhaps has religious or philosophical significance. (Warder 1977: 149)

The story of Śakuntalā, an *upākhyāna*, in the *Mahābhārata* (1, 62–69) depicts Duḥṣanta/Duṣyanta's ideal reign, his hunting, Kāṇva's hermitage on the bank of the river Mālinī and his *gāndharva* marriage with Śakuntalā. Śakuntalā demands that her son be his heir. When she reminds the king of his promise, though remembering fully, he denies knowing her. But celestial voice tells Duḥṣanta that the boy is his son, that he should accept him and name him Bharata.

The question of the source of Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntala* remains unsettled. While Emeneau thinks that Kālidāsa used the Śakuntalā story in the *Mahābhārata* as the basis for his play, others, like Winternitz, argued that the Śakuntalā episode in *Padmapurāṇa* was the source of Kālidāsa's work (Gönc Moačanin 1999: 353–354). B. Stoler Miller in the *Theater of Memory* mentions that *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (9.20.8–22) and the *Padmapurāṇa* (3.1–6) both contain

versions of the story and thinks that the former is directly derived from the *Mahābhārata*, while the latter is more elaborate, mixing the epic version with the elements from Kālidāsa's play (Miller 1984: 336).

With regard to the issue of Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntala* vs. the Śakuntalā story in the *Mahābhārata*, Romila Thapar's observation could be useful:

> that every narrative has a context which is consciously or subconsciously derived from a world view and an ideology. A narrative frequently recreated over time becomes multi-layered like a palimpsest… (Thapar 2011: 160)

> Divine proclamation establishes status and legitimacy because the relationship has also to be accepted by the clansmen. It is a society of clans and heroes, a lineage-based society, where ancestry, genealogy and origins are vital. (Thapar 2011: 163)

Kālidāsa reflects a different historical scene as "he carries the rhetoric of the political power of monarchical states" (Thapar 2011: 164).

While in the *Mahābhārata* there are only three characters, Duṣyanta, Śakuntalā and Kāṇva, in Kālidāsa's version there are different types belonging to *nāṭya* literature, such as the *vidūṣaka*, Śakuntalā's friends, the queen and others. Kālidāsa converts the epic narrative into a play, namely the *nāṭaka*. To the original narrative he adds other sub-themes, such as the device of the ring and the device of a curse to account for Duṣyanta's loss of memory, which casts him in a more favourable light. The curse is modified until the king sees the ring, which brings back memories. Some of the typical *kāvya* moments can be seen in the scenes where the king conceals himself and listens to the confidential talk of Śakuntalā and her friends; Śakuntalā makes the pretext that her foot has been pricked by a sharp blade of grass and casts a stolen glance at the king; she expresses her love by a letter, etc.

When van Buitenen (Buitenen 1978: 99) mentions "The grandiose setting of the play—hermitages where the ancient sacrificial fires still smolder, royal palaces, aerial chariots, gold-peaked mountains", we just have to remember the description in the *Mahābhārata* where

Duṣyanta during his hunt first comes into a dense forest, a wood with hills and boulders, which was empty of water and people and the river was dry. Then he reaches a wood which ends in a vast wilderness. Only after he makes for yet another wood does he meet with holy hermitages and finds himself in a most enchanting wood. And this is the hermitage where Śakuntalā lived.

It seems to me that Kālidāsa had no feeling of crossing any boundary while taking a known story from the past and transforming it according to his own vision following the rules of the art of *nāṭya*. How could he have a feeling of anything constraining his imagination when the sources of the themes he used in his *nāṭaka*s were floating and fluctuating around him in different literary genres?

For the sake of comparison, let us check how it looks in the case of the famous *kathā*, i.e. prose writers, Daṇḍin, Subandhu and Bāṇa, who crossed different boundaries in various ways. The plot depends here fully on the author's imagination. It is not a retelling, more or less faithfully, of old stories.

Daṇḍin's *Daśakumāracarita* gives its readers a cultural picture which brings interesting sociological, ethnographical, historical and geographical data. Daṇḍin's *kathā* is extraordinarily rich with its description of the everyday life of his time, which includes polygamy, idol-worship, belief in dreams, omens, ghosts, sorcery, curses, gambling, courtesans and their education, *saṃsāra*, *karma*, human sacrifice, *tantra*, trade, caravans, maritime trade and shipwreck. Gray thinks that Daṇḍin "transforms all his vagabonds and rascals into sons of kings and ministers" because they are thieves, gamblers, experts in different deceitful skills (Gray 1992: 73). Keith mentions, among others, magician fraudulent holy men, courtesans, thieves, fervent lovers and observes that "The world of the gods is regarded with singularly little respect" (Keith 1966: 300). We encounter irony, satire with characters reminding us of *bhāṇa*s and *prahasana*s and *Mṛcchakaṭikā*. I find very interesting the mention of copper-plate inscriptions, as well as sites of ancient cities in the middle of the Vindhya forest. Who were his Yavanas and Kālayavanas if he lived most probably in the 7th century?

He also mentions tribal people such as Kirātas, Śabaras, Bhillas. A reader can be astonished by Daṇḍin's rich mine of various information on different aspects of life! Every *kumāra* has his love-affair and all the stories contain the same schema, which identifies the possession of a kingdom with the conquest of the princess who embodies it. Their falling in love is conventional: love at first sight due to Kāma's arrow or a memory of marriage in a previous life. Daṇḍin pays great attention to the education of princes, who acquire many skills, some of them morally dubious. Brisson is of the opinion that *ucchvāsa* 8 with its hero Viśruta is of special importance, showing the significance of the knowledge of *daṇḍanīti* to be successful as a ruler (Brisson 1984: 50–52). For Onians, one of the high points of the book is the story of Viśruta, within which Daṇḍin composes a virtuoso satire on the *Arthaśāstra*'s injunctions (Onians 2005: 17).

The geography found in his *kathā* can be envisaged literally in a literary way. That means that while reading his text we travel through the Indian subcontinent of his time crossing real boundaries of different countries that were the stages for the actions of ten young men, *kumāra*s. But *kumāra*s during their travels on *digvijaya* never show that they are aware of crossing from one country to another. And the reason is simple—they are literary characters made by Daṇḍin's imagination. But for Daṇḍin the situation was different—from what we know of his life and of the history of his ancestors—he experienced some of his literary boundaries literally. His last station was Kāñci after he had had to leave his town several times to escape the perpetual political conflicts between the Pallavas and Cālukyas.

Brisson in his article "La géographie politique du *Daśakumāracarita*" describes the conquest of the Indian subcontinent by Rājavāhana, son of Rājahaṃsa, the king of Magadha, with the help of his nine friends. Brisson sees three conflicts: between Magadha (Rājahaṃsa) and Mālava (Mānasāra), between Mālava and Aṅga and the reconquest of Magadha. The detailed historical analysis of the kingdoms and cities that Daṇḍin mentions—Mālava, Videha, Kāmarūpa, Suhma, Vindhya, Aṅga, Pātāla, Lāṭa, Pāriyātra, Ujjayinī, Pāṭaliputra, Kailāsa,

Utkala, Kāśi, Campā, Kosala, Andhra, Kaliṅga, Vidarbha, Aśmaka, Vanavāsa, Kuntala, Murala, Rṣīka, Koṅkana, Nāsikya, Anūpa—could be valuable in the better understanding of the period in which he lived. According to Brisson commenting on the works of Collins, Mirashi and D. K. Gupta, *Ucchvāsa* 8 alludes to the kingdom of the Vākāṭakas (Brisson 1984: 55–56).

DeCaroli is of the opinion that Viśruta's tale in *Ucchvāsa* 8 is "a reliable source for historical information" and thinks that Daṇḍin "was creating an elaborate metaphor within a tale by paralleling the characters with people and events in the Pallava court." He adds that Daṇḍin "peppered the text with names that we now know to be historically accurate from fifth-century Vākāṭaka inscriptional evidence" (DeCaroli 1995: 671). He thinks that Daṇḍin was a court poet of the Pallava kings during the seventh century A.D. (ibid.: 672) and that Viśruta, according to new evidence, might have been a historical figure. In that way the *Daśakumāracarita* can be seen "as an allegorical warning to the young king Narasimhavarman" (ibid. 1995: 677). Cinzia Pieruccini aptly defines Daṇḍin's story as "fantastoria", which can be translated as 'fantastic history' because the author describes the adventure of *kumāra*s in real geographical places but the political situation appears anachronic and not synchronically real.

Does the physical journey mirror an inner quest of princes? It seems to me that although they crossed so many physical boundaries during their travels and met with different adventures, *kumāra*s did not go through deeper transformations of inner experiences. The reason is that they belong to typical *kāvya* characters despite their picaresque features.

Subandhu's *kathā*, the *Vāsavadattā*, about the love between Kandarpaketu and Vāsavadattā, includes a very large number of references to old legends of tradition. Some of these may appear to be *kāvya* versions of well-known characters from *itihāsa*s and *purāṇa*s. He gives a rich diapason of different cultural items by mentioning Vālmīki, Guṇāḍhya, *Bṛhatkathā*, Naravāhanadatta, Nala, Nalakubāra, Rambhā, Dharmarāja (Yama), Kṛṣṇa, Satyabhāmā, Arjuna, Subhadrā,

Nahuṣa, *Kāmasūtra*, *Mīmāṃsā*, *Nyāya*, digambara Jains, Buddhists; he even says that "teachings of Jaimini destroy the doctrines of the <Buddhists>".

Subandhu's work is so rich in different allusions concerning various subjects that his *Vāsavadattā* is worthy of serious culturological study. For him no boundaries existed, he freely used whatever was known to him from religion, mythology, philosophy and literature, and though very conventional, he managed to transform literarily some of those experiences.

Cartellieri in his article "Das *Mahābhārata* bei Subandhu und Bāṇa" rightly mentioned that for Subandhu and Bāṇa the *Mahābhārata* was an ideal because they use an extraordinarily great number of allusions to the epic (Cartellieri 1899: 62). This is obvious also for the modern reader just cursorily passing through pages of their *kathā*s.

Bāṇa's *Kādambarī* is a very complicated literary work presenting a real plot confusion. Crossing the boundaries happens through different reincarnations of characters in space and time. There is a problem of recognition in the novel: who is who in which incarnation? In this love story between Candrāpīḍa and Kādambarī and a love story between Mahāśvetā and Puṇḍarīka only men die and are reincarnated; female characters stay. In former lives Candrāpīḍa was Candra, the Moon, and presently he is king Śūdraka to whom the parrot Vaiśampāyana tells the story. This is Bāṇa's humorous device of naming a parrot who tells the story with the name of the orator of the *Mahābhārata*. But Vaiśampāyana is also the best friend of Candrāpīḍa and in a former life he was Puṇḍarīka, whom Mahāśvetā loved. To understand the plot one has to read the work and also the contents provided by Indologists who worked on this *kathā*.

But let us come back to the subject of the volume and of my paper. The main characters of the novel crossed boundaries while living in different reincarnations but did they feel the transformations of those experiences? As I see it, they were unaware of any changes because their experiences remained with them in respective reincarnations. In their present lives they have no recollections of their past lives

except by hearing the story about them. Still, there is an enigma—how to explain only one present incarnation of Kādambarī and Mahāśvetā?

Bāṇa pays great attention to the education of Candrāpīḍa and his friend Vaiśampāyana. He enumerates the whole list of arts or *kalā*s, which reminds us also of the importance of education as seen in Daṇḍin's and Subandhu's novels. The importance of the subject of education for all three authors seems to me to be worthy of further study.

In conclusion I would like to cite from the Introduction of Gwendolyn Layne's translation of the *Kādambarī*. In the paragraph *The God Who Wears the Moon for a Crown* she masterfully defines Bāṇa's work:

> Of all the wonderful manifestations of Bāṇa's intellect and artristy, this is perhaps the most intriguing: the characteristics and powers of the god Śiva and of the work of art *Kādambarī* are absolutely interchangeable. Śiva is the creator, preserver, and destroyer. *Kādambarī* is about birth, death, and immutability. Śiva destroyed the God of Love and revived him. *Kādambarī* revolves around the destructive powers of the God of Love who is ultimately conquered when the lovers survive the vicissitudes of life and death and time. Śiva is the Great Time, and time is one of the more peculiar, but perfectly integrated, elements of *Kādambarī*'s time-machine plot. Śiva carries the moon in his hair and is the moon god as Soma, a guardian of one of the quarters, and *Kādambarī* is shot through with the moon's presence as a natural object, a god, and an incarnation. Śiva is *māyin*—the master of illusion, of transformation. *Kādambarī* is a masterwork of illusion and of transformations. (Layne 1991: XXIII–XXIV)

Kāvya authors, by evoking mythological and epic figures, alluding to earlier works, sometimes using motifs, themes and citations, often did cross boundaries and created new experiences by transforming them. But these new experiences mostly belong to the (modern) readers of the works mentioned in my paper and less to their characters. The reason is that it is difficult to see individual transformation of experiences in literature which is full of conventions as *kāvya* is.

But despite its conventions the richness of classical Sanskrit literature invites further research.

Better than my concluding words are those of Bāṇa as told by his narrator Jābāli (Layne's translation): "You see what power to transport, to carry away the heart, this charming story possesses. That which I planned to narrate I abandoned and, because of the enchantment of the tale, let the telling get out of hand" (ibid.: 333).

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